

The environment for media freedom in Honduras has grown worse since the 2009 coup, with increasing violence and threats against journalists. The trend persisted in 2014, as journalists reporting on organized crime and corruption worked under difficult and dangerous conditions. The January inauguration of a new president, Juan Orlando Hernández, brought no change in politicians' general hostility toward the press.

## Legal Environment

Freedoms of speech and the press are constitutionally protected in Honduras, but the legal environment remains problematic. While the penal code's *desacato* (disrespect) provision, which aimed to protect the honor of public officials, was abolished in 2005, other restrictive press laws can still be used to punish journalists who report on sensitive issues such as government corruption, drug trafficking, and human rights abuses. In December 2013, journalist Julio Ernesto Alvarado of the often-targeted radio and television network Radio Globo received a 16-month prison sentence after being convicted of criminal defamation for an incident that occurred in 2006. Although he paid a fine to avoid the prison term, in September 2014 an appellate court confirmed that Alvarado would be banned from working as a journalist during the 16-month period. The authorities continued to attempt to impose the ban late in the year despite an order from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to suspend it pending the commission's review of the case.

A separate criminal defamation case was pending against David Romero Ellner, director of Radio Globo, who was accused in August of insulting a lawyer—the wife of the deputy prosecutor general—on the air. If found guilty, Romero faced a possible 15-year prison sentence, and the broadcaster could be forced to close. In June, Albertina Manueles Pérez of Radio Progreso was charged with sedition over her coverage of a disputed mayoral election. The case was provisionally dismissed in July, which reportedly meant that it could later be revived.

Also in June, the National Congress passed the Law on Protection of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists, Social Communicators, and Operators of Justice. It was intended to strengthen protections for journalists who are consistently under physical threat, and provides for resources and mechanisms to ensure that investigations are carried out when violence or intimidation occurs. While most analysts welcomed the law, the Inter American Press Association warned that it lacked clarity on budget allocations and failed to facilitate coordination among all relevant branches of the government, such as the Attorney General's Office, raising doubts about its ultimate effectiveness.

Access to information remains a serious concern. Officials have reportedly failed to comply with the requirements of a law on freedom of information in force since 2007, and in January 2014 the National Congress adopted the Law on Secret Information, which threatened to further undermine the purpose of the existing statute. The new law would devolve the classification powers of the Institute for Access to Public Information to individual state agencies, giving them the authority to restrict access to information for between 5 and 25 years based on vague criteria. However, only a week after approving it unanimously, the National Congress agreed to suspend the law for further review.

Community radio stations are not clearly recognized by Honduran law, and they operate under the threat of closure. Their ambiguous legal status also exposes them to regular threats and harassment, particularly for stations that carry opposition views.

## Political Environment

Government pressure and threats continue to limit editorial freedom, and in 2014 there were multiple reports of harassment and intimidation of journalists by officials. President Hernández set a negative example in July, when he threatened reporter Ramón Maldonado at a press conference. In response to the journalist's question about an alleged plan to adjust the borders of a nature reserve to accommodate mining activity, the president asked the reporter to identify his source and instructed security personnel to take Maldonado's name and photo. Separately, Julio Ernesto Alvarado of Radio Globo and independent journalist Dina Meza were reportedly subjected to physical surveillance and online threats in 2014.

In a case of de facto censorship, Radio Estereo Castilla in the city of Trujillo removed the program *Noticiero Independiente* (Independent News) from the air in August due to alleged pressure from the mayor and a representative of the National Telecommunications Commission. The program, which regularly carried criticism of local authorities, had been broadcast for 12 years and was often disrupted by power cuts.

Self-censorship has been exacerbated by an increase in intimidation and death threats against journalists and their families by both criminal groups and state agents. The trend has weakened investigative journalism and led reporters to avoid certain areas of the country.

The general prevalence of criminal violence in Honduras, and the failure of police and prosecutors to conduct thorough investigations, makes it difficult to determine whether the murders of journalists are related to their work. The Committee to Protect Journalists identified at least two killings in 2014 in which a work-related motive was possible.

## Economic Environment

Honduras has at least nine daily newspapers, six private television stations, and five radio stations that broadcast nationally, as well as a large number of community radio stations. Most of the major outlets are owned by a small group of business magnates who have political and commercial interests and exercise considerable control over content. About 19 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2014; poor infrastructure in rural areas limits penetration.

Corruption among journalists and government manipulation of state advertising purchases remain common. Many journalists tailor their coverage to serve the interests of state and other advertisers.